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## Giovannino's "Libertà":

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### Guareschi's Personal Freedom in Opposition to Power

**Abstract:** Through personal testament, written word, and illustration, Giovannino Guareschi successfully resisted Nazi brutality as a prisoner of war, opposed the Communist party in the Italian *dopoguerra*, and denounced the high-handed Christian Democratic leadership of Alcide DeGasperi. His primary *Novecento* legacy centers on his consistent non-violent call for the dictates of personal conscience to triumph the abuses of those who wielded power.

**Key Words:** Italian Resistance; storytelling; conscience; Nazi-fascists; *dopoguerra*; Communists; political cartoons; humor; 1948 Italian general election; short story; Don Camillo; Peppone; Talking Crucifix; libel; De Gasperi; imprisonment.

“Libertà è dovunque vive un uomo che si sente libero” avevo scritto su un cartoncino appeso al muro della mia cella. Adesso, nella mia stanza delle Roncole, ho appeso al muro lo stesso cartoncino aggiornato: “Libertà è soltanto là dove vive un uomo che si sente libero.”

(Giovannino Guareschi)<sup>1</sup>

*Guareschi Speaks up to Power: The Experience of the Lager*

Most scholars and the general public know of Giovannino Guareschi through the immense success of his *Mondo piccolo* anthologies that have sold millions of copies worldwide.<sup>2</sup> But more than his accomplishments as a journalist of popular literature, he deserves greater recognition as an unfaltering proponent of speaking truth to power. Indeed, we can view so much of his personal actions and life's work, especially during World War II and the *dopoguerra*, from this perspective. Guareschi was a superb storyteller who saw humor as a weapon of reason used to champion the primacy of conscience and individual freedom. In crafting entertaining tales, vignettes, and newspaper editorials, he sought to awaken readers to appreciate their ability to think for themselves as a way to counter potential abuses of power. In this study, beyond discussing this point, I will specifically explore his non-violent opposition to Nazi tyranny, Communist

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful for this opportunity to write about Guareschi as a stalwart advocate for speaking truth to power, and in this study I integrate several paragraphs from my previous works undertaken during these last fifteen years, which are listed under Works Cited.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to a few sources, Guareschi is Italy's most translated author of the Novecento (Bocca 34; Dossena 25), and the cinematic lore of *Mondo piccolo* screen adaptations further bolster Guareschi's fame. Italian television stations frequently broadcast Don Camillo movies, and the cantankerous priest remains an endearing character in Italian popular culture (Romano 439).

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politics, and Christian Democratic leadership in the figure of Alcide De Gasperi. Guareschi's most important legacy as a Novecento writer and public figure finds its deepest root in this resistance.

On 9 September 1943, after Italy's Armistice with the Allies, German forces captured Guareschi, who was serving on active duty in Piedmont as a Lieutenant of Artillery. He had been forced to return to military duty several months prior in order to avoid serving jail time: in a drunken stupor upon finding out in October 1942 that his brother had been killed in Russia — an erroneous report as it turned out — he caused a ruckus and cursed Mussolini's regime. Angelo Rizzoli, who employed Guareschi as an editor of his humorous weekly *Bertoldo*, convinced fascist authorities to be lenient on him by recalling him to arms in lieu of incarceration.<sup>3</sup> With the Armistice, Guareschi honored his military oath made to Vittorio Emanuele III, but he refused to swear allegiance to the Third Reich. Shortly thereafter he was shipped by train, along with more than five thousand other former Italian soldiers, first to Poland and then to Germany. Since Italy had not declared war on its former ally (a decision the Badoglio government takes on October 13, 1943), the Germans classified Guareschi and the other Italians they captured as Internati Militari Italiani (IMI) instead of Prisoners of War, rendering void their 1929 Geneva Convention rights. As internees, therefore, the International Red Cross could not provide Italian soldiers adequate assistance, and the rules governing imprisonment did not apply (Nello, "La resistenza clandestina" 147).

To cope with the tribulations of prison life, Guareschi maintained a diary and several notebooks in which he captured his daily activities, psychological state, and musings on the meaning of his captivity that he then would share with fellow inmates in the form of public lectures, going from barrack to barrack to raise morale.<sup>4</sup> Guareschi gravitated seamlessly to this activity because of his

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<sup>3</sup> Guareschi donned his Alpino uniform and was posted to Alessandria where he received news of the Armistice. As Guareschi shared in a 1946 letter in *Candido*: "Si tratta di un episodio poco onorevole in quanto accade che io, la notte del 14 ottobre 1942 — riempitomi di grappa fino agli occhi in casa di amici — per tornare alla mia casa di via Ciro Menotti che è lontana non più di ottocento metri, impieghi due ore. E in quelle due ore (dall'una alle tre) urlo delle cose che poi l'indomani trovo registrate diligentemente in quattro pagine di protocollo che un importante personaggio di certa U.P.I. mi mostra nel suo ufficio di via Pagano" ("Lettere al Postero" 3).

<sup>4</sup> In one of his prison notebooks ("Quaderni del lager"), Guareschi gave full expression to his sense of isolation and frustration upon capture, deportation, and internment. Mussolini's government chose not to help them, and the International Red Cross did not have the right to provide assistance: "Tutti si dimenticarono di noi. Nessuno ci rivolse mai una parola, nessuno dimostrò d'accorgersi della nostra cupa situazione. Avevamo bisogno di qualcosa per coprirci, avevamo fame, eravamo senza notizie di casa nostra, molti soffrivano né potevano curarsi per completa mancanza di medicinali: nessuno si sentì di mandarci un pezzettino di pane, una pasticca per la tosse, che significassero un qualsiasi interessamento. Abbandonati da tutti" (90-91).

extensive experience in journalism and radio broadcasting. After the war, he published many of his reflections of this experience in his *Diario clandestino* (1949). Forty years later his children published more of his writings in *Ritorno alla base* (1989), and then in 2008 they released *Il grande diario*, a thorough integration of their father's IMI diary and notebooks.

In his lectures to his IMI companions, Guareschi spoke of everything, from hunger and longing to see his children to his conception of humor, holding in all eighty-three of these encounters, an average of one a week (Bertellini 8). Together with other enterprising prisoners, he helped to form a culture of resistance that aimed to protect human dignity and stiffen the resolve to persevere. These interventions represent a full-fledged example of how Guareschi spoke truth to power and urged others to do the same. Indeed, the minute and dwindling numbers of surviving Italian ex-prisoners, now in their mid-nineties, often recall Guareschi as the "cantore collettivo" of their travaux (Nello 44).

As Guareschi later reflected in his preface to the *Diario clandestino*, in prison the inmates were worse than abandoned: "[...] si ritrovò soltanto con le cose che aveva dentro. Con la sua effettiva ricchezza o con la sua effettiva povertà" (XV). Out of meager means, they built a democratic existence:

Non abbiamo vissuto come i bruti. [...] Sorsero i giornali parlati, le conferenze, la chiesa, l'università, il teatro, i concerti, le mostre d'arte, lo sport, l'artigianato, le assemblee regionali, i servizi, la borsa, gli annunci economici, la biblioteca, il centro radio, il commercio, l'industria.

(XV)

Nevertheless, as his diary entries attest, he suffered terrible bouts of homesickness and boredom. And yet, in spite of the loneliness, deprivations, and deplorable conditions in the *lager*, he began to comprehend that humor was not a literary genre "ma un modo particolare d'intendere la vita" (64). Although imprisoned, he thought that if he and his fellow prisoners could assign positive meaning to events in the present, they would not be subjected to interpretations shaped by others in the future (64).

Through humor, Guareschi began to fathom that he wielded a reasoning power that could allow him to remain free even if he was held prisoner. In a lecture entitled "Finalmente libero," for example, Guareschi conveyed how the Germans may have entrapped his physical body but that his "other self," his conscience or soul, was ultimately free (164-65), and in "Signora Germania," he leveled a diatribe against his captors, brazenly vaunting this freedom. For Guareschi, the hardships his German guards imposed on him did not mean subjection. Rather, they helped him to undergo a conversion of self and to discover the priceless gift of his own ability to think and reason for himself, a gift he saw as divine:

Signora Germania, tu mi hai messo tra i reticolati, e fai la guardia perché io non esca.  
 È inutile, signora Germania: io non esco, ma entra chi vuole. Entrano i miei affetti, entrano i miei ricordi.  
 E questo è niente ancora, signora Germania: perché entra anche il buon Dio e mi insegna tutte le cose proibite dai tuoi regolamenti.  
 Signor Germania, tu ti inquieti con me, ma è inutile. Perché il giorno in cui, presa dall'ira, farai baccano con qualcuna delle tue mille macchine e mi distenderai sulla terra, vedrai che dal mio corpo immobile si alzerà un altro me stesso, più bello del primo. E non potrai mettergli un piastrino al collo perché volerà via, oltre il reticolato, e chi s'è visto s'è visto. L'uomo è fatto così, signora Germania: di fuori è una faccenda molto facile da comandare, ma dentro ce n'è un altro e lo comanda soltanto il Padre Eterno.  
 E questa è la fregatura per te, signora Germania.

(41)

Guareschi's realized that the one inviolate freedom the Nazis could never take away from him was his own ability to decide what life's events meant and how he thus chose his own reaction to them.<sup>5</sup>

Infused with this same emotional charge for his supreme freedom, Guareschi implored his fellow inmates in "Ricerca" to refrain from blindly following the whims of the masses when they returned to Italy after the war:

La verità non si insegna; bisogna scoprirla, conquistarla. Pensare, farsi una coscienza. Non cercare uno che pensi per voi, che vi insegni come dovete essere liberi. [...] Strapparsi dalla massa, dal pensiero collettivo [...] ritrovare in se stessi l'individuo, la coscienza personale.

(182)

In prison, Guareschi came to grasp that personal conscience should always trump any value, cultural movement, or dictates guided by the masses.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The spirit expressed in "Signora Germania" provides a nice parallel to Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl's words in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1962): "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one's own way" (86).

<sup>6</sup> Guareschi describes the fundamental impact the *lager* had upon him as a journalist in these terms: "La mia scuola di *giornalismo politico* io l'ho fatta in un *Lager*: e migliaia di degni galantuomini che hanno vissuto quei dolorosi giorni assieme a me possono testimoniare come il tenente Guareschi signor Giovannino abbia onorevolmente svolto la sua attività di *giornalista libero, onesto e sereno* dal primo all'ultimo giorno della sua permanenza nel *Lager*. Ho imparato, in quella dura scuola, come sia bello, come sia virile, come sia civile dire pubblicamente ciò che si pensa, specialmente quando ciò comporti un grave rischio. [...] Io ho fatto una severa scuola di *giornalismo politico* e sono ben convinto che un giornalista veramente libero come io sono deve sempre sostenere la causa che egli, in *piena coscienza*, ritenga giusta, *costi quel che costi*" (*Se ciascun* 20).

Imprisonment taught Guareschi about the tremendous power he actually possessed: faithfulness to follow his conscience formed by the reasoning process ultimately guaranteed his personal liberty.

The basis of this awareness authorized him to oppose those in power, and during the war, that meant his German guards. One of the more common forms of storytelling that Guareschi adopted in his lectures was the fairy tale with the incipit "C'era una volta." Most of these stories, however, are not magical or supernatural, nor do they reflect the classical structures, motifs, and elements that many folklorists have identified. Instead, as their titles indicate — "La domenica," "La strada," "Il grammofo," "La ragazza," "Il panettone Motta" and "Il letto" published in *Ritorno alla base* — these tales, nostalgic in tone, describe events, themes, and objects belonging to a world that prisoners could no longer access.<sup>7</sup>

Quite often, these talks played upon hidden meanings and double entendre that even Italian-speaking German guards in attendance could not understand. One former inmate, for example, recalled listening to a lecture:

In fondo allo stanzone, c'era un "Sonderführer", un ufficiale amministrativo della Wehrmacht. Sapeva l'italiano meglio di molti di noi poiché era cresciuto a Firenze, dove, da civile, era insegnante di musica. Giovannino "sbotteva" Hitler, Göbbels, il nazismo, la superiorità degli Ariani biondi. Era una sparatoria di doppi sensi, tutti li capivamo e ridevamo fragorosamente. L'Ufficiale tedesco si guardava attorno un po' seccato, domandandosi tra sé e sé cosa ci fosse da ridere.

(Biscossa 41)

Thus, Guareschi was able to lambaste his captors and let his companions in on the derision.

As he chided his guards, he constantly stressed the point that he and his comrades at all costs had to keep from aiding the Germans. Guareschi wrote two important discourses, "Macchie indelibili" and "La ragione per cui," about the moral stain Italians would incur even by simply helping the Germans to pick ripened cherries (*Ritorno alla base* 40; 59). If they did choose to fight for Mussolini, or even serve the Reich by working in German industries, they would be aiding an enemy who ravished the Italian countryside and terrorized Italians, both partisans and civilians alike. A former internee recalled that Guareschi buoyed their resistance to keep from cooperating with the Germans by once saying, "Non farlo, perché per i tedeschi non bisogna attaccare neanche un francobollo" (Ascari 22). Guareschi himself twice refused to help the Nazis,

<sup>7</sup> As Giovanni Mosca, Guareschi's co-founder of *Candido*, explained: "Le chiamava, queste rievocazioni, favole, tanto erano lontane nel tempo e nello spazio, si da sembrare irreali o vissute in un'altra vita. [...] Guareschi leggeva, e quasi sempre lo accompagnava una fisarmonica. [...] alla fine, si piangeva nella baracca, si piangeva per la tovaglia, per il calamaio, per i fiammiferi: sì, perché c'erano una volta, in quel paese tanto lontano forse sparito, che si chiamava Italia, anche i fiammiferi ("La lettera" 4).

once with the offer to become a journalist in Berlin and again with the chance to return to Milan and resume his editorial duties with *Bertoldo*, the satirical newspaper he directed before the war.<sup>8</sup> As he wrote several years later, his choice cost him dearly in physical terms — “Allora il mio peso era di chilogrammi 46: peso lordo, compresi i miei stracci, i miei pidocchi, le mie pulci, i miei zoccoli di legno e un magone grosso così” (“La coda di Riccardo” 248) — but, along with his fellow prisoners who opted to remain in prison, they came back “tarati nel corpo ma integri nello spirito” (249).

Guareschi’s most inspiring model of denouncing power as a prisoner comes with his 1944 Christmas show, *Favola di Natale*, written and produced in the Sandbostel *lager*. The work, performed as a musical production and later published with illustrations after the war, specifically aimed to mock his German guards and impugn the morally impoverished Nazi regime.<sup>9</sup> With the *Favola*, Guareschi obtained clearance from the censors and conducted a few rehearsals. Opening night took place in the camp’s theater on Christmas Eve and

la sera della vigilia, nella squallida baracca del “teatro”, zeppa di gente malinconica, io lessi la favola e l’orchestra, il coro e i cantanti la commentarono egregiamente, e il “umorista” diede vita ai passaggi più movimentati.

(6)

The narrative action is a dream in which Guareschi’s son, Albertino, his pet dog Flick, and Albertino’s grandmother, all journey north from Italy, striving to see Giovannino. Along the way they encounter magical animals, trees, and other vegetation that all provide information on how to proceed to the *lager*. At a certain point the crew meets a family of three Sparrows that skips along and sings cheerfully as they carry knapsacks on their shoulders. At the same moment, descending from the north comes a group of three Crows that orders the Sparrows to halt:

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<sup>8</sup> For an insightful study of Italian internees who chose to swear allegiance to Mussolini or the Reich, see Ferioli.

<sup>9</sup> Guareschi told fables simply because his fellow prisoners liked them. For instance, after he had written and performed, in December 1943, his first Christmas tale, also entitled “Favola di Natale,” a story about the Holy Family who comes to the *lager* and manages to enter to give birth to the Savior, a compatriot sent him a hand-written note, letting him know how much the narrative had meant to him: “[...] sono tornato proprio ora dal teatro, dove ti ho ascoltato a occhi chiusi! Non meravigliarti di questa lettera, entusiasta come quella di una ragazzetta. E non te ne meraviglierei certamente quando ti dirò che le due ‘piccole, semplici parole’ e le tue ‘piccole, semplici cose’ mi hanno riportato per un’ora nella mia casetta di Roma, dove vivo ogni ora con la fantasia, nella sottile, dolorante nostalgia di ogni giorno” (Vietri n.p.). Guareschi carried the letter back to Italy with him from the *lager*, and the fact that he kept it shows that he knew his storytelling had a special effect on other internees.

"Altolà: documenta!" ordinarono con malgarbo le tre Cornacchie ai Passerotti: e vollero sapere dove andassero e cosa facessero. E i Passerotti spiegarono che andavano alla ventura e vivevano alla giornata nell'attesa che tornasse il bel tempo.

"Pessima vita!" borbottarono le Cornacchie. "Perché non venite con noi, invece? Vi daremo prima di tutto miglio e orzo a volontà per rimettervi in carne . . ."

"E poi?" chiesero i Passerotti.

"E poi vi infileremo in uno spiedo nuovissimo, sterilizzato, d'acciaio inossidabile, e vi cuoceremo con fuoco di legna di primissima scelta. Sentirete che bel calduccio!"

"Preferiamo rimanere al freddo!", risposero i tre Passerotti.

Ma le Cornacchie insistettero. "Non vi piace forse l'arrosto? Possiamo accontentarvi col bollito! Vi cuoceremo in una splendida pentola in duralluminio cromato . . . No? Vi dà forse noia il fumo? Noi abbiamo ogni riguardo per i nostri amici! Se vi dà noia il fumo vi cuoceremo su un potente fornello elettrico di 200 watt. Anzi, facciamo 300: non badiamo a spese, noi! . . ."

Ma i Passerotti dissero ancora di no.

"Magri ma crudi!" esclamarono.

Allora le Cornacchie se ne andarono indignate borbottando con disprezzo: "Fannulloni!" [...]

(32-33)

This encounter conveys the tale's most crucially significant allegory. As earlier discussed, one of the most effective ways that the prisoners undermined the Nazi war effort was to refuse to serve the Reich by working for the Germans in any capacity. The Sparrows, refusing to be bullied, would rather remain skinny and uncooked than fall into a trap.

When the Crows walk away, Albertino, Grandma and Flick receive the surprise of their lives: Babbo, who has himself left the *lager* in a dream, comes to greet them. The reunited family sits quietly together, sharing a few morsels of food, when they hear a plaintive, eerie chant of those people who wait for their loved ones. When the song fades, midnight arrives, and the family hears the cry of the Christ Child. Far to the north, however, another baby cries in his bunker; he is the God of War who already has small claws and is warmed by the fires of a flamethrower. Then silent shadows catch Albertino's eye: they prowl through the woods to stand near infinite numbers of tombstone crosses. As Babbo explains, they are the spirits of the living who come in search of the dead. When a mother finds the tomb of her son, she sits and speaks with him about treasured days that will never return. Dawn arrives, and thus the family's reunion, Albertino's dream, and the actual show come to a close.

Several prisoners who saw the recital testified how the *Favola* convincingly moved them to thunderous applause and the unabashed shedding of tears (Tira, "Ricordi" n.p.; Fantasia, *I racconti* 124). Ironically, however, both Guareschi's own journal entries of the time and a letter to his wife Ennia specify how the writing and production of the *Favola* made him feel all the more acutely and terribly alone:

[...] ed ecco un altro Natale è passato. Un altro tristissimo Natale. Pensavo a voi nella squallida casa di Maore. [...] Ho anche mangiato perché mi hanno invitato. Sempre senza notizie, senza pacchi, senza niente. Forse il Natale del '45? Non lo spero. Coraggio. Nino. ("Postkarte," n.p.)

His diary entry a week later at the turn of the New Year is even more somber: "Anche quest'anno è finito. Anno maledetto. Ne comincia un altro — che sarà forse peggio. Non ho più speranza che la guerra finisca. [...] Vedrò la mia bambina a due anni? ("Diario Quotidiano," 31 December 1944, n.p.). Deprivations in the *lager* caused him to lose close to sixty pounds, but as stated earlier, longing for home gave Guareschi his toughest challenge. These words in intimate correspondence with both himself and his wife help us fathom the emotional price he paid at the hands of the Third Reich as he spoke truth to its power.

After the war in the fall of 1945 Guareschi published the *Favola* with Edizioni Riunite, and for the book Guareschi provided seventy-four cartoons, sketched by himself, to accompany the narrative. Three of them shed important light on the fable's satirical function that motivated Guareschi when he first composed the work as a prisoner. As he explains in the preface:

[...] la banalissima vicenda interessava i prigionieri forse più ancora del contenuto polemico della fiaba stessa.

Perché *La favola di Natale* ha anche un contenuto polemico che le illustrazioni rendono oggi evidente anche al meno avvertito dei lettori, sì che io potrei premettere alla fiaba: "I personaggi di questo racconto sono tutti veri e i fatti in esso accennati hanno tutti un preciso riferimento con la realtà". La "realtà" era tutt'attorno a noi, e io la vedevo seduta a tre metri da me, in prima fila, vestita da Dolmetscher: e quando il "rumorista-imitatore" cantava con voce roca la canzoncina delle tre Cornacchie e il poliziotto di servizio sghignazzava divertito, io morivo dalla voglia di dirgli che non c'era niente da ridere: "Guardi, signore, che quella cornacchia è lei."

(*Favola 6-7*)

The Crows, crafted as German guards that have been shot out of the air, appear much like Stuka dive bombers that have smashed to earth. Another image suggests how Guareschi saw his captors as pigs: German warriors that march to greet their newborn King of War appear swine-like with their stumpy legs and fat hocks, even without curly little tails. Finally, a sketch of three Toadstools portrays the likeness of Hitler, Hindenburg, and Mussolini (Visentin 234-38). But, perhaps more than mushrooms, Guareschi depicted a more vulgar representation of three phalli.

These cartoons evince the bitterness he still felt more than seven months after his liberation. It naturally took him time to work through the pain and anger over captivity so that by 1949 he was able to write in *Diario clandestino* how his greatest accomplishment in surviving the war was having returned to Italy without hate in his heart: "[...] io esco senza medaglie ma vittorioso perché,



nonostante tutto e tutti, io sono riuscito a passare attraverso questo cataclisma senza odiare nessuno" (XI). The publication of the *Favola* thus also gives testament to his private journey of exorcising harsh and bitter feelings. But, as a show in a German prisoner-of-war camp, the work eloquently reads as Guareschi's spiritual capstone where he brilliantly synthesized all that he had come to learn in the *lager* about the capabilities of humor and the inviolability of the conscience to bend to the abuses of power. It provides a striking example of Resistance literature: in opposing Nazi might, he could indeed retain his dignity and remain ultimately free, and his efforts of storytelling helped others to resist in much the same measure. As he wrote after the war:

Nel '43 ho rifiutato di servire i tedeschi e fascisti e mi hanno portato in un Lager dove ho usato tutta la mia intelligenza e la mia abilità per impedire che i tedeschi riuscissero a prendere per fame i disgraziati che erano con me. Ho fatto un buon lavoro.

(*Chi sogna* 273)

*Guareschi Speaks up to Power after the War*

After the English liberated Guareschi in April 1945 and he returned to Italy in September, Angelo Rizzoli hired him once again to found a new satirical weekly called *Candido*. With this forum, Guareschi immediately set about defending the Italian monarchy on the occasion of the national referendum to decide what institutional form of government Italy would follow and, in time, he became a true post-war champion of conscience, both through his political opposition to communism and his sensational libel trial that Alcide De Gasperi brought against him.

We do well to study this aspect of Guareschi in detail.

After the Italians decided upon instituting a republic in 1946, Guareschi hurled himself fervently against the powerful Communist Party. As we have gathered, the experience of the *lager* greatly sharpened Guareschi's stake in championing individual human freedom, and he detested Communism because in his opinion Communists blindly followed the wishes of their superiors and the masses, negating their own, and everybody else's, ability to think for themselves, a God-given right imprinted upon the human conscience. Having lived under Fascism, Guareschi had come to know firsthand the disastrous effects of totalitarian doctrine; he did not want Italy to plunge into that peril again. Indeed, any political movement of the masses concerned him immensely (Gualazzini 129).

In *Candido's* first year of publication, Guareschi created a cartoon figure that left a lasting impression. Since Communists inhaled so much false propaganda that they did not scrutinize, they obviously needed a third nostril to exhale the extra quantity of smoke. The *trinariciuto* (the one with three nostrils) became one of Guareschi's signature vignettes, especially present in "Obbedienza cieca, pronta e assoluta" cartoons, where a Communist party official shouting "Contrordine, compagni!" perpetually hastens to tell his

companions that they should read a directive in *L'Unità* in a completely different way.<sup>10</sup> Guareschi also created two extremely effective and popular political posters that helped to ensure the Popular Front's defeat in 1948. In one poster, a man stands alone in an election booth ready to vote, the curtains pulled. The caption reads: "Dio ti vede, Stalin no." In the other, the skeleton of an Italian prisoner of war left to die in Russia, entrapped behind barbed wire, points his bony finger to the Popular Front symbol of Garibaldi imposed over a star. The caption reads: "Mamma, votagli contro anche per me." So effective was Guareschi's political censure that *Life* magazine hailed him as Europe's most effective anti-Communist spokesperson, who together with De Gasperi had effectively won the elections (Sargeant 115). In 1948 the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) had a powerful ally in Guareschi.

In all of his writings, Guareschi continued to accentuate his central message — that readers steadfastly needed to heed their individual conscience in order to protect themselves against the power of mass political movements. In doing so, he continued to refine his understanding of humor and what its use meant for him. Guareschi held that although collective demonstrations and group philosophies fostered hate and discord, Italians could defeat them through humor. For example, with "Signore e signori" in *Italia provvisoria* — an album of his own political musings interspersed with newspaper clippings and photos — he drove home the notion that humor's primary function is to undermine rhetoric with its capacity to break "la spirale della retorica" (20). Humor, as a practical and ethical construct of the spirit, combatted the pompous rhetoric of the "partiti di mandria" (24): "L'umorismo è il nemico dichiarato della retorica perché, mentre la retorica gonfia e impennacchia ogni vicenda, l'umorismo la sgonfia e la disadorna riducendola con una critica spietata all'osso" (26). Therefore, for Guareschi, humorous words must be ruthlessly simple, trenchant, quick, and potent: "L'umorismo è semplificazione, e, costretto a ridurre ogni cosa all'osso, riesce (più o meno bene) a fare lunghi discorsi con pochissime parole. E dice senza dire. E per dire si serve della forma più facile: la storiella" (31).

Since Guareschi thought that Italians for centuries had been imbued with rhetoric, he presently challenged them to learn how to laugh, to see the incongruous and thus paradoxically to become, through reason, more serious

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<sup>10</sup> As a stickler for proper spelling and grammar, Guareschi often lambasted *L'Unità* for the quantity of its typographical errors. For example, in one cartoon a group of Communist *trinariuti* is in a classroom instructing a bunch of bugs. The caption reads: "Contrordine compagni! La frase pubblicata sull'*Unità*: 'Bisogna fare opera di rieducazione dei compagni insetti', contiene un errore di stampa e pertanto va letta: 'Bisogna fare opera di rieducazione dei compagni inetti'" ("Contrordine compagni!" 32). As a simple "Google" search will verify, the term has fully entered the Italian political lexicon and remains current.

(44). He then exhorted Italians to rediscover the best part of themselves in order to defeat the post-war rhetoric prone to foster hate and discord:

Cominciamo col distruggere la parte peggiore di noi stessi: quella che pascola nei prati della retorica e si ubriaca di frasi fatte, di aggettivi altisonanti, di fedi inconcusse, di dogmi politici, di imprescindibili destini.

(44)

As with several of his discourses in the *lager*, here too Guareschi issues the call to follow one's inner voice rather than political dogma.

From a reading of "Signore e signori," we can further grasp how Guareschi conceives of humor as a serious endeavor whose function is well beyond mere laughter. For him, humor rejects presumptuousness and self-importance, abrading all that is superfluous. Ethically, it calls one to be honest about faults and shortcomings, and it asks one to live life without hatred. For Guareschi, once this internal operation takes place, one may use humor to observe the incongruities of life, to penetrate political platforms and incongruities, and to check ruthlessly the *prepotenza* of alleged leaders and the masses, exalting one's own individual conscience in the face of social pressure. Through his reflections, Guareschi tells us that since humor has the power to expose extremist rhetoric used to foment social friction and strife, he does not take lightly the critical essence and role of his own craft.

Guareschi returned again to discuss his use of humor when he delivered a 1951 speech, "Conferenza a Lugano," in Lugano, Switzerland. At this occasion, Guareschi stated his belief that humor was a weapon born out of the human capacity to reason that protects personal freedom and meaning and defends against the intrusion of vulgar thought and culture. Humor, as a capacity of reason, unveils the comical and illogical in any situation.<sup>11</sup> It defends us from being swept away by the spiteful rhetoric of those in power (6). Short stories that are humorous, in other words, have a most serious function since humor leads to honesty and rigor and dictates what we should reject or embrace:

L'umorismo è l'acido col quale si prova se il metallo che voi presentate come oro è veramente oro. L'umorismo non distrugge. L'umorismo rivela ciò che deve essere distrutto perché cattivo. L'umorismo risana. L'umorismo distrugge soltanto l'equivoco. Rafforza ciò che è sostanzialmente buono.

(30)

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<sup>11</sup> Guareschi's concept of humor is Pirandellian inasmuch as humor, defined as the "sentimento del contrario," is predominantly a function of critical and analytical reflection. As Dante Della Terza explains in "On Pirandello's Humorism," the "feeling" of which Pirandello speaks is really something much more. It "is not really a kind of seismograph limiting itself to measuring the waves of an emotional earthquake, in spite of the qualifications attributed to it by Pirandello; it is not a sentiment at all since its activity is overwhelmingly critical, analytical, and rational" (20-21).

Humor in storytelling triggers the capacity for human reflection and thought, calling readers ultimately to affirm what their conscience knows is good and to reject what it knows as evil.

*Guareschi, a Champion for all Times*

Both “Signore e signori” and the “Conferenza a Lugano” detail how Guareschi championed a profound reverence for individual conscience, and for him, a practicing Catholic, this stance had deep theological rooting. In light of Christian faith, the Church from the earliest times has always recognized the central role conscience has for helping humans open up to grace.<sup>12</sup> Since humans, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, carry God’s divine light within them, each person must follow the dictates of his or her heart in making moral decisions. At the same time, of course, the Church calls its faithful to have an informed mind and conscience based on two thousand years of its own wealth of wisdom expressed through the scriptures, moral argument, official teaching, sermons, and traditions. In the end, however, personal conscience, in the words of John Henry Cardinal Newman, “is the messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ” (129). An informed conscience opens the faithful to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to move closer to God (*Catechism* 438-42).

In the *Mondo piccolo* series, the best example of humor’s close link to reason and the call to heed individual conscience comes with the voice of Jesus as the talking crucifix.<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to the first collection of *Mondo piccolo* stories, Guareschi explicitly states that Christ’s voice represents his own conscience:

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<sup>12</sup> One of the more interesting Gospel reflections on an intimate aspect of conscience occurs in Matt. 16: 13-18 and Mark 8: 27-30, when Jesus of Nazareth, having come to Caesarea Philippi, asks his followers to explain who people say that he is. They respond by telling Jesus that some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets. Then Jesus addresses them directly: “But who do YOU say that I am?” (my emphasis). Simon Peter then responds: “You are the Christ, Son of the Living God,” and Jesus rewards him by telling him that He will build his Church upon him. For the faithful, each person responds to that same question only by searching the reasons of the heart teased through the reflections of his or her own inviolate and divine conscience. All biblical citations are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*.

<sup>13</sup> The *Mondo piccolo* short-story series has Don Camillo, Peppone and the Talking Crucifix as its main characters. Over the next twenty years, Guareschi wrote 366 tales anthologized in three compilations beginning in 1948 with *Don Camillo*, followed by *Don Camillo e il suo gregge* in 1953 and *Il compagno Don Camillo* in 1963. Together with the five films made of the *Mondo piccolo* — *Don Camillo* (1952), *Il ritorno di don Camillo* (1953), *Don Camillo e l'onorevole Peppone* (1955), *Don Camillo, Monsignore ma non troppo* (1961) and *Il compagno don Camillo* (1965) — these works have ensured that Don Camillo is one of the most recognizable literary figures in all of Italian culture.

Ebbene, qui occorre spiegarsi: se i preti si sentono offesi per via di don Camillo, padronissimi di rompermi un candelotto in testa; se i comunisti si sentono offesi per via di Peppone, padronissimi di rompermi una stanga sulla schiena. Ma se qualcun altro si sente offeso per via dei discorsi del Cristo, niente da fare; perché chi parla nelle mie storie non è il Cristo, ma *il mio Cristo*: cioè la voce della mia coscienza.

(*Don Camillo* 33)

As a protagonist along with Peppone and Don Camillo, this voice is present in 154 of the 346 tales (*Tutto don Camillo* 576), issuing the call to readers to think for themselves. That example, Guareschi hoped, would induce others to oppose any person or movement that could abuse its power.

Guareschi himself did just that through his column "Giro d'Italia," bravely reporting politically motivated vendetta murders in the *dopoguerra*, conducted ostensibly by Communist thugs in his home region of Emilia-Romagna. As the journalist Giovannino Lugaresi wrote, the column

in sintesi dava notizie, attraverso i ritagli dei giornali locali inviati dai lettori, di quel che accadeva nella Penisola. E nel testo di tale rubrica, i fattacci della rossa Emilia erano di gran lunga i più numerosi e più efficaci rispetto al resto della nazione, al punto che parlò della sua regione come del "Messico d'Italia" [ . . . ].

(8)

This horrific brutality captivated Guareschi. In the tales of *Mondo piccolo* of 1947 and 1948 he fictionalized the sense of collective fear in "Notturmo con campane," "Paura," "La paura continua," and "Il cerchio si rompe." Indeed, well into the 1950s, he returned to this theme often with stories like, "Due mani benedette" and "Il sangue non è acqua," when Don Camillo, Peppone, and the town folk have to solve a haunting mystery surrounding an "eliminato." Guareschi did not hide from recounting this post-war viciousness, even fearing that he might be personally harmed as a journalist for discussing them.<sup>14</sup>

Christ's voice of conscience often has a didactical function, serving to call Don Camillo (and readers more generally) to refrain from using violence. For instance, in "Uomini 2 — Mucche 100," Peppone has called an agricultural strike, and workers have abandoned a farm, letting its animals go hungry and sick. Don Camillo cannot stand this mistreatment, especially since an unattended cow is about to give birth, and he does his best to repress his rage. The following exchange demonstrates well Guareschi's capacity to illustrate the reasoning process of one person struggling to honor the true voice of conscience:

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<sup>14</sup> Apart from his children telling me personally in an interview that their father feared a reprisal because he reported the murders in the Triangolo Rosso, I have not found any personal note from Guareschi detailing the same. But, it is interesting that in "Revolverata" Jesus (Guareschi's conscience) replies to Don Camillo, who has revealed his fears to the Talking Crucifix in light of the assassinations: "[...] se tu non avessi paura, che valore avrebbe il tuo coraggio?" (4).

“Gesù,” disse al Cristo Crocifisso “tenetemi o faccio la marcia su Roma!”

“Calmati, Don Camillo” lo ammonì dolcemente il Cristo. “Con la violenza non si può ottenere niente. Bisogna calmare la gente col ragionamento, non esasperarla con atti di violenza.”

“Giusto” sospirò don Camillo. “Bisogna indurre la gente a ragionare. Peccato però che, mentre si induce la gente a ragionare, le vacche crepino di fame.”

Il Cristo sorrise.

“Se, usando la violenza la quale chiama la violenza, riusciamo a salvare cento bestie, ma perdiamo un uomo: e se, usando la persuasione, perdiamo cento bestie ma evitiamo la perdita di quell'uomo, secondo te cosa è meglio? La violenza o la persuasione?”

Don Camillo, che non riusciva a rinunciare all'idea di fare la marcia su Roma tanto era indignato, scosse il capo.

“Voi, Gesù, mi spostate i termini: qui non è questione di cento bestie! Qui si tratta di patrimonio pubblico. E la morte di cento bestie non rappresenta semplicemente un danno per quella testa di ghisa del Pasotti [the owner of the farm who refused to bargain with Peppone], rappresenta un danno per tutti, buoni e cattivi. E può avere ripercussioni tali da inasprire ancor più dissidi esistenti e creare un conflitto nel quale invece di uno scappano fuori venti morti.”

Il Cristo non era d'accordo:

“Se col ragionamento eviti il morto oggi, perché col ragionamento non potresti evitare i morti domani? Don Camillo, hai perso la tua fede?” (85)

Later, Don Camillo convinces Peppone to rescue the dying cows, and he puts an end to the strike. In the end, therefore, Don Camillo has listened to that divine voice which calls him to reason, and he helps them terminate the strike with peaceful means.

Our understanding of Guareschi's thoughts on humor and his self-reflections helps us better to grasp the ideological underpinnings that his *Mondo piccolo* articulated masterfully through Jesus's discourse with Don Camillo. At a spiritual level, the humor inherent in the series speaks directly to the lesson he learned in the *lager* about his inviolate conscience, while the tales embody his fervent desire that his readers heed their own conscience through reason in order to do the same.

As Guareschi continued to elaborate his Don Camillo series in *Candido*, he began to distance himself more and more from the Christian Democrats that he had helped elect to power in 1948. The growing might of that political party began to worry Guareschi, who saw its power as potentially capable of unduly commanding the will of the Italian people (Rossini 862; Chiesa 165). He firmly disliked how the DC took advantage of its favored status with the Church, and he often exhorted the party not to foment confusion among the electorate concerning the distinction between the two (“Se a ciascun” 1).<sup>15</sup> Guareschi never

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<sup>15</sup> In early 1952, he expressed his concerns in these terms: “Il 18 aprile, la gente aveva sfiducia nei comunisti e fiducia in De Gasperi. Oggi la sfiducia nei comunisti è la stessa, se non aumentata. E la fiducia in De Gasperi è, sì, ancora grande; ma la sfiducia negli uomini che lo attorniano aumenta: questo è il guaio. De Gasperi è un uomo che cammina

shied away from attacking any political party, personality, movement or ideology that he saw as dangerously invasive of conscience. He particularly disdained anyone who saw himself or herself above the law, and he at times (one could argue) went too far in his censure.

One such moment occurred in 1951 through a cartoon in *Candido* that satirized Luigi Einaudi for promoting his personal business interests as a producer of Nebbiolo wine while using his public and political clout as President of the Republic. The Undersecretary of Justice authorized proceedings against Guareschi for libel, and he was absolved. But upon appeal brought by the Procuratore Generale della Repubblica he was subsequently found guilty and given a suspended sentence of eight months in jail. Three years later a Milan tribunal would activate this suspended sentence upon the conclusion of one of the most sensational Italian trials of the twentieth century. For Guareschi the experience from start to finish proved, after the *lager*, to be the most spiritually and physically taxing in his life.

In the pages of *Candido* in January 1954, Guareschi published two facsimiles of letters dated March 1944, during the Nazi occupation, written on Vatican letterhead and signed by Alcide De Gasperi, at that time in self-exile in the Vatican. The letters requested that the Allies bomb the periphery of Rome. Guareschi felt incensed not so much by De Gasperi's action as loathsome in terms of inviting destruction upon the Italian people, but by how De Gasperi had supposedly passed himself off as a Vatican representative in order to make the request to the Allies ("Il Ta-pum" 21). He held the statesman's political integrity as suspect.

De Gasperi took Guareschi to court for defamation of character. The trial, itself a fascinating study in Italian jurisprudence, lasted two months. In the end, De Gasperi won, and the court sentenced Guareschi to serve time in prison, adding the time for the suspended sentence of the Einaudi affair.<sup>16</sup> Incensed by what he experienced as a lack of justice, Guareschi refused to appeal. Since the tribunal had never allowed Guareschi to submit his letters to a scientific examination, he had no effective way to prove that the letters were authentic. At the same time, even though the court never proved that the letters were false, it had charged Guareschi with defaming De Gasperi's character through the

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con un sacco in spalla: dentro il sacco ci sono le fesserie che commettono i suoi. Bisogna stare attenti perché, se il sacco diventa troppo pesante, De Gasperi o mollerà il sacco, o finirà assieme a esso per le terre" ("Il caso Vanoni" 2).

<sup>16</sup> Both Gnocchi and Tritto provide excellent studies of the case, accusations, proceedings and sentencing. Giuliani-Balestrino contextualizes the case while considering the broader mystery of a secret correspondence between the British and Italian prime ministers. Finally, Franzinelli's 2014 study makes a very strong case that the letters were indeed forgeries in spite of Guareschi's belief to the contrary. My own analysis of the case was published in *The Italianist*.

editorial commentary that had publicized the letters. To this day, legal scholars still study the reasoning the court used in reaching its verdict.

In any event, Guareschi accepted the sentence, honorably respecting Italian law, but he vehemently rejected the unfair process that in his opinion led to the guilty verdict. Thus, in an impassioned article, he explained to his readers that he would refuse to appeal:

No, niente Appello.

Qui non si tratta di riformare una sentenza ma un costume. La sentenza è regolare, ha il crisma della legalità. Il costume è sbagliato, e non è una questione che riguardi la Magistratura: è una questione di carattere generale, che riguarda l'Italia intera. [...]

Hanno negato tutta la mia vita, tutto quello che io ho fatto nella mia vita. Non si può accettare un sopruso di questo genere. [...]

Vado in prigione. Accetto la condanna come accetterei un pugno in faccia: non mi interessa dimostrare che m'è stato dato ingiustamente. Il pugno l'ho già preso e nessuno potrà far sì che io non l'abbia preso.

Non mi pesa la condanna in sé, ma il modo.

*E il modo ancor m'offende.*

(“No, niente appello” 16)

Guareschi then said he would gladly take up his old rucksack and enter prison: “Niente di teatrale, niente di drammatico. Tutto semplice e naturale. Per rimanere liberi bisogna, a un bel momento, prendere senza esitare la via della prigione” (16).<sup>17</sup> Guareschi spent 409 days in Parma’s San Francesco Prison, at the time the only Italian journalist since the founding of the Republic ever to have spent actual jail time for libel (Zincone 2).<sup>18</sup> He spent another six months on probation, confined to his home in Roncole.

Misconstrued appraisals of Guareschi’s sentence and refusal to appeal began immediately. The day after the trial, as Guareschi reported in *Candido*, the official newspaper of the Christian Democrats, *Il Popolo*, proclaimed in its

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<sup>17</sup> Guareschi crafted a Don Camillo tale to vent his frustration. In it, Alcibiade, a landowner, sues his renter Bazzigà for having fabricated a letter with Alicibiade’s signature that invalidated his contract. Alcibiade had in reality signed the letter but later thought it best not to get out of the contract. The court decides in favor of Alcibiade, who then triumphantly returns to town and brings a candle to Don Camillo, inviting him to light it on the altar in front of the Madonna. Don Camillo lights the candle. It flickers and then goes out. He whittles the wax and tries once more, but again the light falters. He brings the candle to the rectory, lights it, and sure enough, the candle burns brightly. As soon as he brings it to the altar in front of the Blessed Mother, the candlelight continues no more. Don Camillo begins to think that something diabolical is at work. He takes the candle, leaves the chapel and walks along the bank of a canal. Just as he stops to toss the candle in the water, it squirts from his hand and slithers away into the darkness: “Meno male che non mi ha morsicato’ sussurra don Camillo che ormai non capisce più niente” (“Il cero” 10-11).

<sup>18</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this claim is still true: no other Italian journalist has ever served actual behind-bars jail time for libel.



broad head: "Le lettere attribuite a De Gasperi sono false! Un anno di reclusione al diffamatore Guareschi" ("Un anno" 1). Over the years, many journalists and historians have repeated this same claim (Franchi 33; Battista 3; Montanelli 43; Biagi 31).<sup>19</sup> But to his dying days, Guareschi continually stated that he still considered the letters to be authentic. Guareschi had obtained the documents from Enrico De Toma, a former soldier and aide to Mussolini; in 1959 when a journalist reported that Guareschi was the person "che sposò la causa dei documenti falsi di Enrico De Toma," Guareschi retorted:

Ciò è inesatto: io sposai la causa di due lettere autentiche a me affidate — perché ne disponessi gratuitamente come meglio credevo — dal De Toma. Non sposai la causa dei "documenti falsi" di Enrico De Toma".

("Rispetta almen" 12)

A few years earlier, he had answered the notion that he wanted to serve jail time in order to expiate his sins and undertake penance with these words:

Dopo il Referendum, salutando il mio Re che partiva per l'esilio, ho dichiarato che, pure non accettandola, mi impegnavo a subire la Repubblica così come, più avanti, pur non accettando una condanna da me ritenuta ingiusta, ho subito il carcere rifiutando sdegnosamente di appellarmi.

("25,000 trinariciuti" 8)<sup>20</sup>

While behind bars, Guareschi relied upon both his faith and ribald sense of humor to cope, a point best understood in his defiantly passive-aggressive way to pillory Mario Scelba, the prime minister who he believed had counseled De Gasperi to bring suit against him. He taped Scelba's picture to the bottom of the lid that covered his chamber pot, as Guareschi illuminated his readers:

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<sup>19</sup> Montanelli and Biagi claimed that, after he had served his time, Guareschi later admitted to them that he had made a mistake and wanted to atone for his error by serving out his sentence. Giulio Andreotti also suggested something similar. Writing in a letter to a lawyer who in 1996 attempted to help Guareschi's children have the sentence officially overturned, the senator stated: "Uno dei miei collaboratori aveva ottime relazioni con Guareschi [...]. Mi disse dopo aver parlato più volte con Giovannino di avere la certezza che il carattere fiero del personaggio lo avesse indotto a subire il carcere, pur essendosi convinto di essere stato tratto in inganno" ("Letter to Ubaldo Giuliani-Balestrino" 7). Here Andreotti implies that his confidant had somehow gathered directly from Guareschi that he knew that he had been tricked, and that Guareschi thus knew that the letters were forgeries.

<sup>20</sup> A year before he had stated: "[...] quella stampa governativa [...] si arrabattò per cambiare le carte in tavola presentando una condanna per diffamazione a mezzo stampa come una condanna per pubblicazione di documento falso. [...] le lettere ispiratrici di quel commento che mi fruttò ospitalità al San Francesco esistevano, erano autentiche e ne possedevo io stesso gli originali" ("Lettera al puerpero" 2).

Il “merdometro” consisteva nella foto di Scelba che avevo incollato sotto il coperchio del bojolo e, osservando la mattina la particolare colorazione e il particolare grado di umidità assunti dal viso spirituale dell’allora Presidente del Consiglio, formulavo l’oroscopo politico della giornata.

(“Lettere dal carcere” 2 Oct. 1955 6)

As soon as his cell was renovated with a flushing toilet, he jokingly wrote to Ennia:

Adesso ho l’acqua corrente, ma sento tanto la mancanza del mio caro ‘merdometro’. Tu mi capisci: per quanto rustico, io sono un sentimentale! E, stando così le cose, vorrei che Alberto incollasse quella cosa sotto il coperchio del W.C. del primo piano. Credi, mi farebbe tanto piacere.

(15 March 1955)

Guareschi left prison and returned home to a triumphant family celebration; however, he remained on probationary parole. This experience, as Guareschi would explain to his readers, truly vexed him emotionally. Although he was no longer in prison, he had really not regained his freedom. He expressed his displeasure by creating a new column for *Candido* called “Lettere dal carcere,” and introduced it with a cartoon of himself wearing a collar and leashed to his house on a run-line next to a shorter one upon which he kept his dog Amletto, similarly constricted. These letters, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, were addressed to Margherita, the fictional name he used in his writings for Ennia:

“Libertà è dovunque vive un uomo che si sente libero” avevo scritto su un cartoncino appeso al muro della mia cella. Adesso, nella mia stanza delle Roncole, ho appeso al muro lo stesso cartoncino aggiornato: “Libertà è soltanto là dove vive un uomo che si sente libero”.

Margherita, questa è la prima lettera che io ti scrivo dal carcere: le lettere che hai ricevuto da San Francesco non contano, perché io, allora, non mi sentivo prigioniero.

Io non mi sento libero, Margherita; il collare della “vigilanza” mi pesa mille volte più dell’inferriata e dei catenacci del carcere. Anche se la catena è lunga e mi permette di fare viaggi in automobile, è sempre una catena.

Ho ritrovato il mio mal di stomaco. In questi lunghi mesi di riposo si è irrobustito e mi sveglia tre volte ogni notte. Ha preso il posto delle tre ronde notturne di San Francesco.

(“Lettere dal carcere” 2 Oct. 1955 7)

The humiliating experience of prison and the subsequent period of parole finally took their emotional toll on Guareschi. As his “Lettere dal carcere” indicate, he was tired, disillusioned with Italian society, spiritually drained, and aware that he struggled to recover his creative spark.<sup>21</sup> Luckily, in December 1955, a

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<sup>21</sup> Note, for example, how he explains a pervasive lethargy that consumes him: “Faccio fatica a ingranare marcia. [...] L’orologio mi dice che ho vegliato una notte invano e che oggi è un altro inutile giorno. [...] Oramai è mezzogiorno e il mio secchio è ancora vuoto. [...] Le ore scivolano via rapide come minuti secondi, ed è inutile cercar d’inseguirle. [...]

medical doctor declared to authorities that, for the good of his health, Guareschi needed to travel far away from home.

Guareschi and Ennia first went to Naples for a brief stay, and then, seeking true solitude, they went to Assisi. It was there on 26 January 1956 when he received news that his parole had expired. His children sent a short telegram that simply said: "Viva babbo libero. Bacioni." Later that year he would return to *Candido* and take up the Hungarian cause, decrying the barbarity of the Soviet invasion. His long ordeal had come to an end.

Guareschi's detention, however, had left a permanent scar upon him. In an interview I had with his daughter, Carlotta recalled how her father appeared more deflated, spiritually less vibrant, and his physical movements seemed labored (Author's Interview 2006). In total, Guareschi had spent fourteen months behind bars, and another five confined on parole. He had lived among common thieves and had been treated as such. Unlike his *lager* experience ten years earlier, he had not been swept up by the events of war, nor had he seen his confinement as a way to redeem Italy; and, although he had received his wife and other visitors regularly, he had not found true culture of camaraderie with others.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the best-written evidence of the considerable stress Guareschi had endured in prison — a steep consequence of his opposition to power — comes in his 1961 letter to Andrea Rizzoli, in which Guareschi provided reasons for ending his sixteen-year collaboration with *Candido*. He needed to resign, he said, as a measure of protest over the production of the fourth Don Camillo film, *Don Camillo, monsignore ...ma non troppo*, since it had made his literary creation into a farce, and Rizzoli, the owner of the film company producing the film — the same owner of Guareschi's newspaper — had done nothing to help curtail the abuses of interpretation. In balancing all the positives and negatives

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Probabilmente sarebbe meglio se cambiassi mestiere: il mio povero vocabolario forse non ce la fa più. Le mie duecento parole forse sono consumate dall'uso e non riescono più a dire niente di preciso. Non riescono a fermare un concetto e la pagina è slavata" (1956, 6-7). Furthermore, here is how he voiced his frustration with Italian life: "Purtroppo questi sono i giorni dei falliti, degli uomini senza idee; è l'era dei demagoghi, dei politicanti, degli ipocriti che, nel nome della Giustizia sociale, stanno perpetrando la più orrenda ingiustizia: spersonalizzare l'individuo, ucciderlo per creare quel cretino medio alla cui mentalità la radio, la televisione e l'altra propaganda governativa vanno ogni giorno di più adeguando i programmi" ("Lettere dal carcere" 28 Aug. 1955 6).

<sup>22</sup> In his memoirs of POW life, *Diario clandestino*, Guareschi often stresses the communal experience of imprisonment as a way to resist Germans and Fascists. The IMIs had to rely on each other as a matter of life and death. In Parma, Guareschi was truly alone, and it is no coincidence that in order to recapture a sense of belonging to a wider community, he traveled back to his former POW camps in Poland and Germany in 1957, an experience that he related serially in *Candido* and that his children later published, together with other World War II writings, in *Ritorno alla base*.

that the editor had experienced with Andrea and his father Angelo, Guareschi explained:

Il sopruso del processo, la feroce campagna diffamatoria condotta contro di me dalla stampa e l'aver dovuto vivere, per tredici mesi, tra delinquenti della più spregevole specie, trattato alla loro stregua, l'aver dovuto subire per tredici mesi i piccoli e grandi soprusi, le piccole e grandi viltà [...] tutto questo ha inciso profondamente sul mio spirito. [...] io, uscendo dal carcere, non ero più Giovannino Guareschi. Né più riuscii a ridiventare il Guareschi che ero.

(3-4)

Far from living a springtime in his cell, as he often led his family, and even himself, to believe, this important passage shows how he detested his detention and all the deprivations that it brought. Quite simply, prison had fundamentally shaken Guareschi. He was never afterwards fully the same in spirit.

#### *Guareschi's Ultimate Legacy*

As this study has shown, Giovannino Guareschi spoke truth to power and advocated for individual freedom throughout his literary life. He saw humor as a weapon to curtail those in power who used threats to impede others from thinking for themselves. He resisted the Nazi juggernaut in World War II. *La favola di Natale*, together with his other POW writings that were replete with double meanings, continues to illustrate how he told stories that shrewdly inspired others to persevere in an unarmed struggle against injustices. Even though his stories may entertain us today, back then, to the IMIs, those tales were crucially important in bolstering their will to oppose their captors as best they could. We should note that in sustaining this resistance, Guareschi never espoused physical violence, and not because he knew that his captors, with possible reprisals, could severely injure, torture, or kill him and other IMIs. Guareschi detested violence as a means to speaking up to power since, as a victim himself of Nazi tyranny, he knew it degraded human dignity. He relied upon humor as much more efficient expedient in advocating for justice since he saw its power to awaken the human conscience and grasp what was right.

After the war, Guareschi always honored this tenant. He engaged Italian society in *Candido* with the oppositional acumen and humor that he had gained as a prisoner, and, beyond his Don Camillo stories, his vignettes bolstered the force of his sardonic reporting that aimed to lay bare any political situation, person, or movement that undermined justice and liberty. For more than twenty years, during the Cold War, Guareschi generated influential cartoons, posters, and tales that cautioned his fellow citizens against the sway of Europe's most powerful Communist Party. More importantly, his overriding concern as a political journalist focused on getting his readers to think as individuals for themselves — to jar them into considering what they really held as important values as functioning members of a postwar Italian society. In many ways, with

a much simpler literary style, Guareschi's message recalls how a generation earlier G. K. Chesterton had attempted to debunk the tenets of modernism, atheism, and existentialism through brilliant apologetic essays and paradoxical witticisms. Indeed, both writers convey a prophetic voice that cautions against blindly following cultural and intellectual trends simply because they are in vogue.<sup>23</sup>

For his part, Guareschi's stance against the abuses of power was so strident that he even denounced one of Italy's greatest postwar heroes, Alcide De Gasperi, an act that landed him in prison. Fourteen months later, he left his second captivity haggard in body and sapped in spirit. He paid the price for having stubbornly championed the truth as he knew it, but his personal actions and words used to check those people and movements in power truly deserve our recognition.

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<sup>23</sup>Quite strikingly, I have yet to come across scholarly research that compares the Chesterton and Guareschi in the full breadth of their literary production. In very general terms, both were journalists who gained tremendous popularity as writers through the invention of two Catholic priests — Father Brown and Don Camillo — and who have side-kicks — Flambeau and Peppone — that helped them to underline their human goodness in spite of the errors they commit. Both Chesterton and Guareschi were also illustrators and cartoonists. Chesterton graduated from the Slade School of Art in London, and Guareschi, although not formally trained, drew thousands of images for *Bertoldo* and *Candido*. Finally, and most importantly, both writers were devout Catholics who conserved a strong sense of Christian optimism found especially in *Orthodoxy* and *Diario clandestino*.

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